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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 SAO PAULO 000360

SIPDIS

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STATE FOR WHA/BSC, NEA/ELA
H PASS REP. ISSA
NSC FOR CRONIN
TREASURY FOR OASIA, DAS LEE AND FPARODI

TAGS: [OREP](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [ETRD](#) [PTER](#) [EFIN](#) [BR](#) [LE](#)
SUBJECT: REP. ISSA'S MEETING WITH LEADERS OF LEBANESE COMMUNITY IN
SAO PAULO

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED - PLEASE PROTECT ACCORDINGLY.

SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) During the visit to Sao Paulo of CODEL Grassley (septels), Rep. Darrel Issa (CA) held a separate meeting with four leaders of Sao Paulo's Lebanese community. They discussed the size and activities of Brazil's Lebanese community as well as the influence of the broader Arab community on the Foreign Ministry (Itamaraty) in formulating Brazil's Middle East policy. End Summary.

REPRESENTATIVE ISSA MEETS SAO PAULO'S LEBANESE LEADERS

¶2. (U) In a separate meeting from the rest of the CODEL, California Representative Darrell Issa met over drinks at the CG's residence with four leaders of Sao Paulo's Lebanese community to discuss issues of Lebanon, the Middle East, and Lebanese expatriates. In addition to Rep. Issa, CG, Issa staffer Laurent Crenshaw, and Poloff, participants included Joseph Sayah, Lebanese Consul General in Sao Paulo; Souheil Yamout, a long-time investment and government relations advisor to the Hariri Family Group; Alfredo Cotait Neto, President of the Brazil-Lebanon Chamber of Commerce; and Guilherme Mattar, a Director and Secretary-General of the Brazil-Lebanon Chamber of Commerce. Rep. Issa told the group he is of Lebanese descent and his grandfather lived in Rio de Janeiro before settling in the United States. He has been actively engaged in issues related to Lebanon and the Middle East for years, both as a Congressman and before that as a businessman.

¶3. (U) Brazil's Lebanese community is the largest expatriate group of Lebanese worldwide. CG Sayah confirmed for Representative Issa that after four generations since large-scale immigration began, Sao Paulo alone is home to some eight million persons of Lebanese descent. Issa wondered aloud if large Lebanese expatriate communities such as Sao Paulo's might be tapped to support the democratic process in Lebanon. Sayah pointed out that currently Lebanon does not have an absentee voter process, and the country's parliamentary system would not provide the opportunity to affect presidential elections, which is critical to advancing Lebanon's fragile democracy.

¶4. (SBU) Rep. Issa and the group discussed a range of issues facing Lebanon today, the most pressing being Iran's new influence in the country after the power vacuum left by Syria's pullout. Sayah repeatedly linked Hezbollah to Iran, and warned that in upcoming presidential elections in Lebanon, any candidate who does not specifically denounce Hezbollah is implicitly supporting Iran as Hezbollah's current benefactor and puppet-master. Closer to home, the group candidly acknowledged that Hezbollah supporters operate in Parana State and the tri-border region where Brazil, Paraguay, and Argentina meet.

ALLEGED SYRIAN INFLUENCE WITHIN ITAMARATY

¶5. (SBU) Sayah and Yarmout gave a somewhat surprising account of the current influence on the GoB of various elements of the Arab community in Brazil. When asked why the GoB had taken some confusing stands counter to the United States regarding Middle East policy, both men described the MFA (Itamaraty) as being greatly influenced by Syrians in Brazil. They said that for generations, Syrian-Brazilians have become diplomats, while Lebanese immigrants have focused on business. In the past these trends were not noticed because there was no divergence in opinion or interests among the various elements of the greater Arab community in Brazil.

¶6. (SBU) However, with the Syrian pullout from Lebanon and a growing hostility between the two countries fueled by the assassination of Lebanese former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, the GoB finds itself behaving almost schizophrenically, both Sayah and Yarmout asserted. The descendents of Syrians purportedly entrenched in the Brazilian Foreign Ministry have taken public stands in

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support of Syria, allegedly at times even without the knowledge or authorization of others in the Lula administration. Further, the Arab-Brazil Chamber of Commerce has become extremely influential, and the organization tends to oppose U.S.-led initiatives in the Middle East. EMBASSY BRASILIA COMMENT: Lebanese CG Sayah's comments reflect a fascinating and apparently sincere point of view within Brazil's Lebanese community, and merit further examination and reporting. That said, while under the Lula administration the MFA's positions on a number of Middle Eastern issues have been problematic for the USG, vexing and even inexplicable, we have no way at present of verifying whether or not they are signs of the existence of a cabal of Syrian-Brazilian diplomats pursuing their own agenda. END COMMENT.

¶7. (SBU) Yamout said that to counter this putative Syrian-based influence, he recently obtained 10,000 signatures of Lebanese-Brazilians on a petition demanding that the Lula administration as a whole, including Itamaraty, play a more balanced role regarding the Middle East. (NOTE: Both Yamout and Sayah implied that "Arab" interests may no longer be the same as "Lebanese" interests. They referred to a subtle change in Itamaraty policy from being pro-Lebanese to pro-Arab, and thus increasingly incompatible with Lebanese interests. END NOTE.) He called the petition a down-payment on grass-roots activism, and said the community will push Itamaraty to support U.S. resolutions on Lebanon, Syria and Iran. Rep. Issa said it will be important to garner international support for a new U.N. resolution following Resolution 1559, and for smart investments in Lebanon, avoiding the corruption that has been seen in past programs.

¶8. (U) Issa wrapped up the evening by declaring that if the Lebanese expatriate communities of Brazil and the United States can stand together to press their respective governments to cooperate on promoting democracy and strengthening institutions in Lebanon, the day may come soon when Lebanon will finally be free of all foreign influence.

¶9. (U) This cable was coordinated/cleared with Embassy Brasilia.

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